



82: Collateral Grief by cali-chan

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Summary: "I have to be sad? When someone I know dies?" Mike stops by the cabin after Bob's funeral to bring El some stuff, and a simple question leads to some deep realizations. PG-13, friendship/HC, Mike/Eleven, nearly a week post S2 climax. Rated for mentions of child abuse and descriptions of gory scenes as seen on the show. (Spoilers like whoa!)

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"I have to be sad? When someone I know dies?" Mike stops by the cabin after Bob's funeral to bring El some stuff, and a simple question leads to some deep realizations.

I never said these were all going to be fluffy, guys.

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Mike had to adjust the weight of the box he was carrying onto one arm so he could knock on the door of the cabin. He carefully did the secret knock and waited. It took about half a minute, and he tried to take it in stride instead of freaking out, but internally he couldn't help but wonder if something was wrong.

Had he done the secret knock right? El had taught it to him earlier in the week, but maybe he'd got the sequence wrong or something. Maybe she was asleep and hadn't heard it? Or maybe she just wasn't supposed to open the door when people showed up unexpected, and Mike was going to be left standing at the door for ages like an idiot.

Before he could further doubt himself, however, he heard the locks click on the other side of the door and then it swung open just a little, Eleven's curious expression peering out through the gap. When she saw it was him, however, her eyes widened and her mouth drew into a big smile as she swung the door wide open. "Mike!" She threw her arms around his neck in a hug that he could only half-reciprocate because he was lugging a huge-ass box under his left arm.

Not that he wasn't going to try, of course. "Hi, El," he said, squeezing her slightly around the waist, unable to hold back a grin. He'd visited her just that week, but somehow it still felt like he hadn't seen her in ages, and he missed her. He wondered if that feeling was ever going

to go away.

When she pulled back, however, her eyes were wide and her expression wary, as if she was worried about something. Before he could ask, she stated, "Hopper's not here," in a stage whisper, almost like she was afraid the chief would hear her from miles away.

Mike had to smile at how adorable she was, but he did see her point: he wasn't supposed to hang out at the cabin with El when there wasn't an adult present. It was a rule Hopper had instituted since day one, and personally Mike thought it sucked, but he wasn't going to risk getting on Hopper's bad side and not being allowed to see El at all. He wasn't going to let that happen ever again.

That said, it's not like he couldn't try and *bend* the rule a little bit. "Yeah, I know, he was at the service..." He pointed behind him with his thumb in the direction where Nancy and Jonathan were waiting for him in Jonathan's car, but then he remembered that the clearing where they usually parked was too far away from the cabin to actually be able to see it from the porch. "But it's okay," he assured her. "I'm not staying, I just stopped by to bring you some stuff." He signaled to the box he was carrying. "Can I come in?"

She nodded, apparently just realizing that she'd left him standing on the porch, and he walked in as she held the door open. He put the box down on the couch and took off his jacket because the inside of the cabin was much warmer than the forest outside.

El came to stand beside him by the couch, sneaking a glance at the contents of the box. "For me?" she asked, pointing at it curiously.

He nodded, smiling at her as he rolled up his sleeves. "Yeah!" He pulled the box toward him and started pulling out toys, books, games, and figurines. "My mom wanted me to get rid of all of this because of... stuff... she got mad at me about," he stumbled on revealing too much of his behavior in the past few weeks. He knew El had checked up on him through the year, so she knew he'd missed her, but he didn't want her to know how angry he'd been and how much trouble he'd gotten himself in. It would make her sad.

"She wanted me to take it to Goodwill or something, but I figured you

could probably use it more," he added as he pulled out some of his *Zoids* action figures he didn't use anymore, some of which were missing parts. "This way you have more ways to entertain yourself while you're in here rather than just watching TV," he signaled to the device which, as far as he could tell, was currently playing a rerun of *Hunter*, and paused. "...Does Hopper know you're watching this?"

Eleven looked between him and the television for a moment, obviously not understanding where the question came from, but eventually nodded. "Why?" she asked.

"Nothing, it's just..." He frowned, not sure where he was going with this. "My mom thinks that show's too violent for kids to watch," he explained, but it's not like it mattered anyway. It's not like he even *wanted* to watch it— he'd caught episodes of it at his friends' houses before, because it was one of Lucas's favorites, but he wasn't really interested in it. It just didn't seem like the type of thing El would like, either.

In response, Eleven simply shrugged. "Hopper's a cop," she declared as if that explained everything. And honestly, when Mike thought about it, it kind of did.

"Anyway," he said, diving into the box for more stuff he could show her. "I wish I could've brought more girly stuff, but Mom gave most of Nancy's old toys away ages ago and whatever's left she's saving for Holly..." He pulled out a familiar brown T-Rex he'd put into the box just the night before. "Hey, remember this?" he asked, showing it to her.

She smiled as soon as her eyes fell on the toy, and their fingers brushed as she reached out to pull it from his hands. "Rory," she said, her smile turning into a giggle when she pressed the button and a roar burst out of the tiny speaker in the plastic dinosaur's belly.

Mike's heart pitter-pattered, not just because she was beautiful when she laughed, but also because she remembered Rory's name. He'd thought she wasn't really paying attention to his nerdy chatter that day, or at least that she'd tuned him out by that point; she'd already been looking at Will's picture by the time he got to Rory's roar. It made him unreasonably happy that maybe this stupid little toy could

possibly mean as much to her as it did to him.

"I was going to keep it, before..." his voice trailed off, because he'd been about to say *Before you came back*, but that was a period of his life he didn't even want to think about anymore. She was back, and that was all that mattered. "Um, so now that you're here, I thought maybe you'd like to keep it."

She nodded eagerly, hugging the dinosaur to her chest. "Thank you," she beamed brightly at him.

"Cool," he smiled back, a little breathless. He cleared his throat. "So, you can go through all of this," he added, moving to pull out some *G.I. Joe* action figures his dad had bought for him but he'd never really cared for. "And if there's anything you don't like just leave it in the box and I'll take it back or whatever," he finished with a shrug.

When he turned to look at her, however, he noticed that she wasn't really paying attention to the toys he was showing her; instead, she seemed rather entranced by him— or rather, his clothes. "What? Is something wrong?" he asked, hoping it didn't turn out that he had spilled or smudged something on his shirt while rummaging through the box.

She shook her head. "This..." Still holding Rory with one hand, she stretched her other arm forward, her fingers suddenly fluttering softly around the first button of his shirt. "It's different," she wondered aloud, a little mystified. Her knuckle brushed against his collarbone and Mike's stomach started doing somersaults.

"Oh, um, yeah," he replied, trying his hardest to keep his voice from breaking into an embarrassing squeak. When she pulled her hand back his brain was able to function more properly. He sat down on the couch as he explained. "We came straight here from Bob's funeral, so that's why I had to dress like this," he signaled to his outfit, now somewhat unsure.

It's not like he was all dressed up or anything. He'd only told his mom about Bob's funeral just yesterday; she'd heard about the "car accident" that supposedly killed her old classmate but he'd never been more than a passing acquaintance, so she wasn't attending the

service herself. Mike pleaded to go, however, arguing that he knew Bob from RadioShack when he and his fellow members of the A/V Club had to go in to buy supplies, and he'd always been really helpful, so Mike wanted to go pay his respects. Nancy was going anyway to support Jonathan and his family, so he could just catch a ride with them.

Because the service wasn't supposed to be a big deal— Bob had lived in Hawkins his entire life, but his parents had passed away, he didn't have any siblings, and his circle of friends was fairly small— his mother hadn't forced him into some fancy outfit. He was still wearing jeans and sneakers, although Nancy had convinced him to at least wear his one black shirt out of respect. He didn't think it was anything particularly attractive, but he didn't think he looked *bad* either. Did El not... like it?

Thankfully she didn't leave him hanging for long. "It looks nice," she clarified, still thumbing delicately at the plastic of one of the buttons of his shirt. He was sure he was blushing. She carefully put Rory back into the box and pushed it to the side so she could sit beside him. "What's a funeral?" she asked with a small frown, as she usually did when he blabbered about something she didn't know.

"Uh, well, you remember last year we had one for Will when we thought he was dead?" he reminded her. "We had to dress up, too, and I had to wear a tie." He demonstrated by tightening his collar around his neck with one hand, and she seemed to understand, because she nodded. "Right, so a funeral is just what you do when someone dies. The body is buried or burned down to ashes, and everybody who knew the person gets together to remember them and just... be sad together, I guess," he explained, finishing the sentence with a shrug. "Today it was Bob's. You know about Bob, right?"

She nodded again. "Joyce's boyfriend," she hazarded correctly. Eleven had never gotten to meet Bob, but Mike figured the chief had probably told her about him at some point. They'd been classmates at school, too, he knew, although he couldn't imagine they ran in the same circle. (To be honest, Mike had a lot of trouble ever picturing Chief Hopper as a teenager. He was the type of person who seemed like he'd been born forty and surly.)

"Yeah," he confirmed with a nod. "Bob wasn't the coolest person around, but he was a good guy," he added, growing sad as he remembered everything Bob had done for them just the previous week. None of it had been his mess, he'd just ended up smack in the middle of everything because he cared about Joyce and Will, but he'd still given his life to get them all out of it safely. "He saved us. He was really brave."

Eleven remained quiet, looking down at her hands where they laid on her lap. Mike figured he was just processing everything he'd explained to her, but then she spoke again. "I have to be sad?" she asked, tentative. "When someone I know dies?"

Mike frowned, not entirely understanding what she meant. "About Bob, you mean?" He shook his head. "Not really. I mean, you didn't really know him, so you don't *have* to be sad for him. You can be sad for Mrs. Byers, though, because *she's* sad," he added.

He expected her to agree with that, but instead she shook her head. "Not Bob," she said. "Other people."

"Other people you knew who died?" Mike wasn't sure where any of this was coming from, but now he was growing concerned. Had something happened when she ran away from the cabin? She hadn't told him where she'd gone or what she'd been doing, so he wasn't sure. "Who else did you know who died?"

She was silent for a while again, dodging his gaze, and he had to prompt her again before she finally explained. "In the lab," she revealed, "after the demo-dogs. I knew some of them." She still wasn't looking at him.

At first he thought she meant back when she was still in the lab, maybe she knew someone who had died, but then an image flashed into his mind: dozens of bodies, savagely bloodied and disfigured, littered around the hallways of Hawkins Lab. He'd tried his best not to look at them directly that day, more focused on getting the hell out of the lab as quickly as possible, but even just glances out of the corner of his eyes followed him, compounded by his eternally overactive imagination, into the darkness of his nightmares.

And it was only just hitting him now that El had seen them that day, too, when she and Hopper went back into the Lab to close the gate. He'd been so worried about her being attacked by demo-dogs that he hadn't stopped for a second to think that she was literally going back to the place where she'd been trapped and abused, and that couldn't have been easy for her— and he wasn't there for her, *God, why couldn't he have been there for her at that moment, he should've insisted*— but moreover, it hadn't even occurred to him that she might see the bodies, just like he had.

And what was worse, he hadn't even thought that she might *know* some of those people. He knew from Hopper and Nancy that all the higher-ups at the lab had been removed after what happened the previous year, and that had seemed good enough for him, for some reason. But he'd never thought about all the low-level players— the lab assistants and the cleaning crew and the security guards and such — that wouldn't have been removed in the transition. Why would they be? They weren't in charge. But they were probably the same faces El saw every day of her life for twelve years, and now they were dead. Eaten by monsters, and discarded like old, chewed-up toys. Those were just nameless people to him, but to her, they were familiar faces, people she'd interacted with. It had to be weird for her to see them dead, regardless of who they were and what they did to her.

Thinking back to all those bodies, though, the first feeling conjured up within him was anger. Whether they were in charge or not, all those people saw an innocent little girl being mistreated and manipulated for *years*, and they did nothing. They just let it happen. Why should they feel sympathy for any of them?

She was staring at him again, this time looking somewhat worried, probably because of the way he was clenching his jaw. "Mike?"

"You don't have to feel sad for them," he declared sharply. "Every single one of them could've helped you all those years, but they never did. They were bad people. They got what they deserved."

"No," El said, switching to sit sideways on the couch so she was staring straight at him without having to turn her head. She grabbed hold of his forearm, drawing his attention to her. "They... don't help

me. But they don't hurt me."

It was her slightly-grammatically-incorrect way of telling him that she didn't consider those low-level, everyday workers to be bad people. He looked into her big brown eyes and realized that she was practically begging him to agree with her.

He didn't understand it at first. He knew she hated Brenner, and he didn't blame her one bit— his own blood boiled every time he thought of that awful man. So why wouldn't she feel the same for the people who helped Brenner do all those awful things to her?

But looking at the earnestness in her expression, he realized this was probably something she had told herself every day she was trapped in that lab. If the person she knew as her father terrified her and angered her every day, she needed to find *some* silver lining, something that was not *entirely* awful about that place. It was nothing short of a miracle that she had turned out to be such a *good* person after being raised as nothing more than a tool to be used. If she had hated every single person in that lab— even the ones who fed her, who tended to her health, who escorted her around on a daily basis— she would've gone insane, or she would've turned into the soulless weapon they wanted her to be.

But Eleven was better than that, Mike knew, and so was he. He had let his anger and his protectiveness of Eleven take hold for a second there, and he shouldn't have. No matter what bad things those people had done in their lives, no one deserved such a gruesome death.

He remembered the urgency he felt when he realized the Mind Flayer knew what they were doing and the lab was essentially sending that group of soldiers to their deaths. Sure, they were working for the lab, for the government that was still insisting on covering up this huge conspiracy that could've killed them and definitely put the entirety of Hawkins in danger, but those guys probably had families, loved ones of their own, people who would miss them. They shouldn't have died. It wasn't right.

Mike realized then that Eleven *needed* this to be true. She didn't want to hate everyone. She didn't want to be angry. And if she needed that to be at peace, he would give her that. He couldn't be there with her

when she walked back into that hellish place that night, but he could give her this. He understood now.

She was still looking at him expectantly, so he nodded. "You're right," he said sincerely. "I'm sorry. I know they weren't all bad people. I'm sure someone out there is sad that they're gone." She nodded her head emphatically, relieved. "But listen, El..." He pulled his arm back to grab hold of her hand in his, lacing their fingers together and giving it a squeeze. "You don't *have* to be sad for them if you don't want to. That's okay, too."

That small frown hadn't left her face yet, but he thought maybe it was less that she didn't understand and more that she was having trouble accepting that as fact. He wanted to make sure she did, so he insisted. "You don't have to do, or say, or feel anything if you don't want to. You know that, right? Not anymore." He looked straight into her eyes so she knew he meant it. "That's what freedom is. And you're free now, El. *You're free.*"

She still seemed uncertain. "If I'm not sad," she started in a small voice, "that... makes me a monster?"

"No, El." He shook his head quickly, feeling a twinge of pain in his heart that she was still carrying these doubts inside her. "Of *course* not. I think..." He tried to think of the best way to put it. "I think there's a difference between not being sad when someone dies, and wanting them to die. You know what I mean?"

She thought about those words for a moment, making him wonder if he'd made any sense. This felt much deeper than anything he'd pondered about before in his life, much heavier. He wouldn't know until much later that at that moment she was remembering her time in Chicago with her sister, having a bad man's life in her hands, and choosing to let him go. As it was, he was relieved when she nodded. "I understand."

"Good." He smiled at her, supportive, and glad he'd said *something* right. "I feel like that's the difference between being human and being a monster. So if you understand that difference, it means you can never be a monster."

She wasn't frowning anymore, but she was looking at him with wide, teary eyes, and for a second he thought she was going to cry. Just as she opened her mouth to say something, however, the door to the cabin opened, startling them both right out of their conversation. They had forgotten to lock it when Eleven let him in, which probably wasn't very smart of them.

Thankfully, it was just Nancy. "Mike, we have to go," she reminded him, poking just her head into the room like she was afraid of being too visible. "Jonathan needs to get back to his family."

"Right. I'll be right there," he told her as he moved to stand up, and she disappeared outside again, not without giving Eleven a smile and a small wave. When he turned back to El, she was standing up, too. "Yeah, so, look through all this stuff," he signaled to the box of toys and such, "and if there's anything in there you don't want, just leave it there and I'll take it back with me next time I visit. Okay?"

She looked at the box for a second like she'd forgotten that was the reason he came over in the first place, but then she nodded. "Yes."

"Okay." He smiled. "So... I'll see you soon?" The way he said it made it sound like a question, which was stupid of him, and he awkwardly debated with himself what he should do now. He wanted to kiss her, but that would be weird and out of the blue. Should he hug her? Wave? Shake her hand? No, that was dumb...

Thankfully for him, she took the decision out of his hands by throwing her arms around him and squeezing him tightly. "Thank you," she told him in a voice full of emotion, her mouth close to his ear so a whisper was more than enough.

"Anytime," he replied as he hugged back, the word barely resonating over the furious thumping of his heart inside his chest. He was so glad that she was back, that she was really here and in his arms.

She was smiling at him as they pulled back. "All right, then... I'll see you soon," he said, congratulating himself for not making it sound like a question this time before flinching when he realized what that meant. "I already said that. Right. Um... bye," he finally concluded once his brain convinced his mouth to *stop moving*, barely

remembering to grab his jacket as he made his way to the exit. "Don't forget to lock the door," he reminded her just before he walked out.

She nodded. "Bye, Mike." The last thing he saw before closing the door behind him was her turning to the box and picking Rory up in her hands again.

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Notes: Okay, so I threw some cuteness in there, too, just so you don't end up falling into a deep dark spiral of depression after reading this.

I wish I didn't believe this was a thing that happened, guys; I really do. But that first weekend when season 2 came out, when we got to episode 9 and watched Hopper and El go back into the lab, and every sane person in the world was paranoid of demo-dogs suddenly jumping them every time they turned a corner, silly dumb me was just sitting there slack-jawed and thinking: "*God*, what if she *knew* those people?" I don't know why I fixated on that, but I did, and it was bad enough that *Mike* had to see all of that, so thinking of how much worse it probably was for Eleven just made it stick with me that much more. (Jesus. *These are thirteen-year-old children.*)

That, plus I've been rewatching the show from the beginning recently, and season 1 always hits me hard because it reminds me of all the crap that poor girl was put through. Sigh. I guess you should expect anything I write in the near future to be more on the serious side, because I'm just in that ~mood~, I guess.

Zoids is a media franchise by Japanese toy company Tomy that spawned toys, anime and manga series, video games and the like, focusing on a group of giant animal-shaped robots that were sort of the precursors to their more-famous younger siblings, the *Transformers*. The toy line was introduced in the US in late 1982. *Hunter* was a crime drama that aired on NBC from 1984 to 1991. It was criticized at the time for showing excessive violence (eh, it wasn't that bad, but it was the 80s...). I didn't watch it during its run because I was too young, but I did catch some reruns during the 90s.

Dee Dee McCall is a freaking icon.